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CAFTA Would Be Harvest for Panhandle Agriculture

Panhandle farmers and ranchers depend on wide-open spaces to produce goods for wide-open markets. A pending trade agreement would help them fulfill that need.

The Central American Free Trade Agreement is an expansion of the North American Free Trade Agreement, which Congress approved and President Clinton signed into law. NAFTA's aim was to open up trade corridors among the United States, Mexico and Canada. CAFTA could open up potentially huge new markets for agricultural commodities such as beef, corn, cotton and dairy - all of which are produced in abundance throughout the Panhandle.

The Texas Farm Bureau has signed on big time to CAFTA, calling it "close to being a no-brainer." Farm Bureau figures show that Texas' farm cash receipts totaled \$15.3 billion in 2003, with about 25 percent of all farm exports - estimated at \$3.4 billion - going into foreign markets.

CAFTA provisions include a 30-percent reduction in beef tariffs, providing a huge new market for the area's enormous fed beef industry.

U.S. Rep. (and longtime rancher) Mac Thornberry, R-Clarendon, remains undecided about CAFTA, as he hasn't yet seen a bill, but added, "For the economy of our area, it's a positive thing. I'm just not sure yet how I'll vote until I see the actual bill."

The NAFTA debate in the 1990s produced a lot of hot air - from Dallas businessman Ross Perot, for example - about how free trade would produce a "giant sucking sound" of jobs flowing out of the United States. But the protectionists' love affair with erecting barriers to prohibit open competition has played itself out.

Farmers and ranchers shouldn't have to operate on a limited playing field.

There can be no doubt of the benefit CAFTA would bring to the region. It should become law.